

Remarks by Ambassador Arnold Chacon

AMIGOS

8th Annual Executive Business Luncheon

Thursday, May 9, 2013

11:30am

Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, Houston Branch

Thank you **Marty and Mike** for your kind welcome. **AMIGOS** is fortunate to have you at the helm, and owes you a debt of gratitude for all that you do to make this wonderful family the great organization that it is.

As an **AMIGOS** alumnus, it gives me great pleasure to join you here today. I'm honored and flattered to reconnect with so many long lost friends and mentors who had such a profound influence on my life. There are so many good friends and accomplished individuals in the room to whom I owe so much. Thank you all for coming. You honor me with your presence.

I'm so touched to see **George Donnelly** here today. I would not have realized even half of my potential were it not for George's wise counsel and guidance. His passion and contributions to **AMIGOS** are unequalled and have made a huge difference.

I'm very glad that **Toby Spoon**, who officiated at Alida's and my wedding 27 years ago, could make it down from El Paso. **Toby, Mike Kercheval**, and I came of age together in **AMIGOS**. I treasure their friendship and am so very proud of their awe-inspiring success stories in international business.

I'd very much like to thank **Bill Arnold, Steve Cook, and Scott Roberts**, for being here today. They are a trio of **AMIGOS** "greats, and legends" whom I greatly admire, and respect. They are truly the lifeblood of **AMIGOS** and have done so much to make the organization flourish and grow.

I also am happy that my good friend **Eduardo Aguirre** could be with us. **Eduardo** is the quintessential American immigrant success story. Eduardo and his lovely wife Tere taught Alida and me so much about how to be effective diplomats during our service together at the American Embassy in Madrid. We are very grateful to them and to all of you for being here today.

Growing up in Colorado, I learned from my parents the values of justice, compassion, and service to a cause greater than myself. My family gave me the moral compass, based on love of God and country, which has guided my life, and which my wife Alida and I have tried to pass on to our children.

It was my mother who led me to **AMIGOS**, drawing my attention to an article in the *Denver Post* that featured the moving testimony of a local high school youth and his life-changing summer of service in Latin America. Little did I know then that **AMIGOS** would become the most character-forming experience of my life.

I'm not exaggerating when I say that my volunteer experiences in Nicaragua, Honduras, Ecuador, and Mexico in the mid- to late-1970s were defining moments in my life. I have so many fond and incredible memories of those years, including my college gap-year pilgrimage to Houston to work at **AMIGOS** headquarters as a volunteer recruiter and chapter development coordinator.

You can imagine my immense pride to have my daughter, **Sarah**, bring my **AMIGOS** experience full circle when she served as a volunteer in Michoacan, Mexico, in 2007.

In so many ways **AMIGOS** was the most challenging and satisfying thing that I have ever done. This unique fraternity of idealistic young people ignited my passion for service and for pursuing an international career.

I had no idea that **AMIGOS** would empower and provide me with an incredibly valuable skill set for going forward in life. Like my fellow volunteers, I learned the fundamentals of teamwork, organization, leadership, and working smart. The simple act of helping a community, assisting in a birth as I did during my first tour, and working to make a vaccination program effective and far-reaching, imbued in me a deep sense of pride, purpose, values, and confidence.

In every way, **AMIGOS** was the best investment of time that I made as a young person, especially since the return I got from it was so much more than I put in. And I continue to draw on that invaluable investment even today.

As U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala, I live the **AMIGOS** experience day in and day out, promoting human development through entities like the Peace Corps, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Through our long-term presence and involvement in Guatemala, the United States has gained the trust of the people and the inspiration to carry on.

It is in the simple, genuine testimonies of indigenous women and campesino farmers, whose lives we and other development organizations seek to improve, that we validate our efforts to make a difference.

The Peace Corps sent the first group of volunteers to Guatemala over 50 years ago. And like **AMIGOS** volunteers, these idealistic, mostly young people **are** assigned to small villages and live among the rural poor. They accept the call to help change the world, and have been transformed into people-to-people ambassadors for change.

Take recent Peace Corps volunteer **Keisha Herbert** of Cleveland, Ohio who, following in the footsteps of volunteers before her, trains girls aged 6 – 14 to create vegetable gardens out of recycled car and truck tires. **Keisha** holds cooking and nutrition classes with the food the girls generate from the gardens, raising environmental awareness and also improving local families' access to food. She also helps communities design and build clean cook stoves and latrines. I am so pleased that former Guatemala Peace Corps volunteer **Misty Bradley** could join us today. She made such an impact, just like **Keisha Herbert**, in her community in Totonicapan, Guatemala. I had the privilege of visiting **Misty** and am so proud of all she accomplished as a volunteer.

Guatemala is the beneficiary of several U.S. Presidential priority initiatives, focusing on food security; preventing HIV/AIDS; mitigating the impact of climate change; and promoting health, citizen security, and educational exchanges. But the program most emblematic of our commitment to making a real difference is called "**Feed the Future**," our food security plan that seeks to reduce the shocking level of chronic malnutrition in Guatemala.

Almost half of all Guatemalan children under the age of five are chronically malnourished. The U.S. government has committed \$200 million dollars to support the **Zero Hunger Pact** of **President Perez Molina** which aims to reduce chronic malnutrition by 10 percent by the end of 2015.

Even more impressive than government resources and projects, however, are the efforts and resources being committed by private citizens – by both faith- and non-faith-based groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

One such organization, called **Helping Hands Medical Missions**, has been providing surgeries, dental and eye examinations, and general medical assistance in the region since 1996. These medical professionals donate their

time and expertise to improve health care services to the rural poor, tangibly improving lives and creating good will.

U.S. companies and NGOs are also reaching out to demonstrate their leadership in the region. In late February of this year, the *Singing River Electric Company* of Jackson County, Mississippi, sent a crew of electricians to Jalapa, Guatemala to help local workers build power lines in their community. Their activity has inspired six other Mississippi cooperatives to participate in the program.

Public-private partnerships are the future of our assistance. They have proven to be critical in drawing in and maximizing the efforts of the government and the private sector.

USAID's partnerships with the corporate sector have resulted in over \$10 million dollars leveraged for education, health, and nutrition activities. *The Nature Conservancy* and *Conservation International*, two well-known NGOs active in conservation efforts worldwide, have contributed two million dollars to complement U.S. government funds marked for an endowment to support competitive conservation grants for Guatemalan NGOs.

To increase market competitiveness and build on the supply-chain approach, USAID also supports public-private alliances in a wide variety of products and services such as mini-vegetables, high-value agricultural products, and gourmet coffee.

Businesses producing handmade ceramics, hand-woven textiles, and implementing community-based tourism are also flourishing. These synergies bring the best of what the United States has to offer – specialized expertise, creating ties between communities, and enhancing the people-to-people diplomacy that has a far-reaching multiplier effect.

In terms of political stability, Guatemala has had its share of challenges, but it has also come a long way since its return to democracy more than 25 years ago. There is a growing belief that institutions such as the **Attorney General's office** and the courts can bring criminals and narco-traffickers to justice.

We strongly believe that strengthening the rule of law is the key to breaking the cycle of violence and corruption that have taken such a heavy toll on the country.

Without a doubt, we have a long ways to go. Guatemala continues to have high impunity rates for crime, which reached 97 percent a few years ago. **But if** Guatemala can succeed in turning the tide and creating a government and private sector responsive to its citizens; **if it** can build institutions that function well; **if it** can develop a vibrant economy and promote social inclusion **it can** serve as a model for Central America and **be** an even stronger partner to the United States in the region.

My work in Guatemala, dealing with rule of law and institutional development, as well as shepherding U.S. government development aid is merely an extension of the work I started with **AMIGOS** back in the 1970's.

I will forever be grateful to **AMIGOS** for giving me, at such a young age, life-enriching experiences, self-confidence; leadership and management skills; and for setting me on the path to a fulfilling and rewarding career in public service.

Please know that **AMIGOS** has a huge fan and supporter in the U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala. And nothing would give me more happiness than to see **AMIGOS** return to its roots in Guatemala in the very near future.

Many thanks for having me. I look forward to seeing you all in Guatemala, and would be happy to take any questions you might have.